Virginia Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability

Focus Group 2

Newport News, VA
April 13, 2004
Follow Up Report

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Introduction

The Governor of Virginia has recognized the need to address interoperability in communities throughout the Commonwealth and has charged the Office of Public Safety to design a strategic plan for statewide interoperability. The involvement of local and statewide emergency responders is essential to the success of developing a Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan.

In order to develop a collaborative Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan, the Office of Public Safety will be conducting six (6) focus group sessions, comprised mainly of informal and formal leaders from fire, law enforcement, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) departments. Additional representation will include public health, local and state agencies in order to accurately capture local perspectives on the state of interoperable communications in Virginia.

The outcomes and purpose of the focus group sessions are as follows:
- ❑ Capture of local emergency responder perspectives on interoperable communications
- ❑ Shared understanding of interoperability issues specific to each region of VA
- ❑ Education and shared awareness of interoperability issues across stakeholder groups
- ❑ Attention paid to emergency responder commonalities as opposed to differences

Each focus group session is designed as a series of conversations centered on the following: interoperability, statewide and regional, as it relates to the current state, the case for why change needs to happen, the envisioned future state, recommended strategies to pursue, and barriers to achieving the future state.

Executive Summary

The Tidewater Virginia focus group session on April 13th, 2004 provided valuable input from the local perspective for the development of the Statewide Communications Interoperability Strategic Plan. The focus group identified the following two (2) major initiatives to be considered during the strategic planning session on May 18th: (1) Develop and adopt a standard

universal architecture to drive the lifecycle of technology from the Request for Proposals to 100% use of the system by all first responders; and (2) Ensure first responder participation in the research and development of interoperability equipment.

Detailed Overview

<u>Current State</u>

The objective of the Current State is to affirm the facts and identify the problems related to interoperability in day-to-day activities and mutual aid efforts.

The Tidewater focus group identified the following Current State themes specific to Day-to-Day interoperability:

➢ Lack of one (1) complete regional coordination plan for interoperability
➢ Inadequate and inconsistent training on the current technologies and multi-jurisdictional capabilities

    Example: VA Beach and Chesapeake both have 800 megahertz frequencies but their systems operated differently

➢ Technology manufacturers and vendors are offering competing interoperability solutions

➢ Interoperability is not clearly understood or defined by all responding agencies in the region: military, federal, state, and local

The Tidewater focus group identified the following Current State themes specific to Mutual Aid interoperability:
➢ National Guard only has ability to communicate with themselves
➢ Insufficient supply of radios
➢ Lack of central authority to establish overall communication protocols
➢ Inadequate communication between first responders on the scene and hospital responders
  Example: 70% of injured victims self deliver to hospital; hospital responders need to be alerted to event scene details

<u>Case for Change</u>
The objective of the Case for Change conversation is to discuss the consequences and implications if changes to Virginia's state of interoperable communications do not occur. The Case for Change statements should appeal to the emotions of individuals and result in action.

The Tidewater focus group identified the following Case for Change:
➢ Regional Vulnerabilities, natural and man-made, exist:
  o Fault line
  o Natural Disasters: flood, hurricanes, earthquakes
  o Ports, Naval Base
  o Limited evacuations routes
  o Proximity to Washington DC
  o Hampton Roads is the 4th highest priority target area
  o Terrorist organizations
➢ Leverage existing regional cooperation and relationships across agencies and jurisdictions to:
  o Collaboratively develop one (1) interoperability communications system to enhance day to day operations and that can be expandable to mutual aid response efforts
  o Increase response and recovery time
  o Increase effective and efficient use of personnel and funding resources

- ➤ Recognizing Fiscal Considerations: Technology can be purchased over time to gradually develop one (1) communications system and phase out obsolescent equipment
- ➤ Lessons Learned from Past Disasters: Large cities and regions may require assistance in responding to disasters.
    Example: New York City had to rely on neighboring jurisdictions for assistance on September 11, 2001 and communications failures resulted in additional lives being lost
- ➤ Public safety, protecting citizens and enhancing a community's quality of life, is a public official's primary responsibility; a first responder's job is to assist in fulfilling this commitment

<u>Future State</u>
The objective of the Future State conversation is to discuss what interoperability in Virginia should be.

The Tidewater focus group highlighted the following elements of the Future State of communications interoperability in Virginia:

Improved Response and Safety:
- ➤ A Communications Officer determines which agencies need to communicate at an event scene
- ➤ Voice activated communications technology automatically selects most effective and efficient method of communication
- ➤ Pictures, streaming videos, voice and data communications are securely imported and exported between jurisdictions
- ➤ First responders are equipped with imbedded locating devices

Improved Consistency and Accountability:
- ➤ Universal standards exist for all voice and data communications
- ➤ Standardized shared language
- ➤ Established controlled process has ability to be overridden in emergencies and provides public safety with priority access
- ➤ Intuitive, user-friendly technology is purchased consistent with regional interoperability strategy

Barriers

The purpose of the Barriers conversation is to identify factors hindering the effort to achieve the Future State.

The Tidewater team identified the following barriers:
➢ Educating and soliciting participation of public officials
➢ Reallocation of funding streams committed for specific projects
➢ Unreasonable and/or inappropriate limitations on funding
➢ Public has misconception of the need for interoperability
➢ Jurisdictions are at various phases of procuring technology
➢ Private sector views interoperability standards as a way to lose market share

Strategy

The purpose of the Strategy conversation is to identify the fundamental strategic initiatives essential to successful implement a statewide interoperability plan in Virginia.

The Tidewater team identified the following critical initiatives to achieve communications interoperability statewide:
1) First Responders and technology purchasers will define interoperable communications, not the technology vendors and manufacturers
2) 100% of first responders will know how to use 100% of the system and will use 100% of the system as appropriate
3) Develop and adopt a standard universal architecture that drives the lifecycle of technology from the request for proposal to procurement
4) First responders will participate and drive research and development of interoperability factors, including software, hardware, maintenance, and training

Next Steps

The outcomes from the six (6) regional focus group sessions will drive the strategic planning session so that the key initiatives identified can serve as the cornerstones of the Statewide Interoperability Strategic Plan. The strategic planning session is scheduled to take place in Richmond, Virginia on May 18, 2004.

There is a strong commitment to maintain the communication flow between the Office of Public Safety and the participants of each focus group as the planning for statewide interoperability in Virginia progresses. A report detailing the results of the Tidewater Virginia focus group meeting will be distributed to the participants by Friday April 16, 2004. In addition, the results of the conversations with all six (6) focus groups will be distributed to all participants by early May.

When asked what the Tidewater team could commit to do differently today to improve interoperability in their region, the group committed to initiate a training program to educate hospital personnel to use the EMSYSTEM:

(1)   Lonnie Byrd, the Eastern Regional Hospital Preparedness Coordinator, will educate and train 18 hospitals, in 26 jurisdictions.
(2)   Carol Smithson, with the CJW Medical Center, will educate and train 16 hospitals, in the Old Dominion area.

Both Lonnie and Carol will report back to the group in 60 – 90 days on the result and success of this training effort.

Participants of the April 13, 2004 focus group meeting, in Newport News, Virginia, on VA Strategic Planning for Statewide Interoperability:

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